

An international survey has revealed the ideal painting and what is universally disliked, by Christina Lamb, *The Sunday Times* (December, 1996)

What the whole world likes best

Picasso, van Gogh and Turner have their admirers. But if the general public, from Versailles to Vladivostok, Peking to Perth, could choose the painting they would most like to see hanging over their fireplace, it would be a mainly blue landscape, preferably with a mountain, lake and a few wild animals, and perhaps the odd historical figure wandering around.

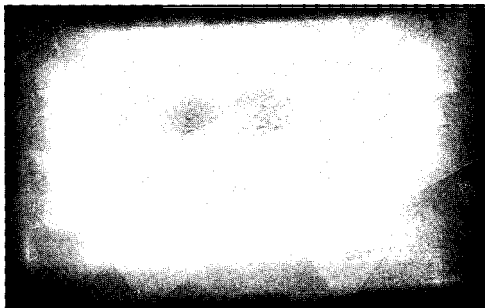


The Kenyan Most Wanted Picture by Komar and Melamid

This is the surprise discovery made by two Russian artists, who now live in New York, in a worldwide poll they have commissioned. Impressed by the reliance on market research both by politicians and manufacturers in their adopted homeland, 51-year-old Alexander Melamid and 53-year-old Vitaly Komar decided the principle could be applied to art. Two years ago they began the monumental task of polling the entire world for what people would most like - and dislike - to see in a painting. With more than a third of the planet now surveyed, the pair believe they have a good idea of what would be the world's most wanted - and unwanted - paintings.

The astonishing thing is the similarity in results. Fifteen nations have been polled so far, including China, France, Russia, Kenya, Iceland and Turkey, and there is a continuing poll on the Internet (see www.diacenter.orgtkmlindex.html). In every country people have voted overwhelmingly for a predominance of blue and a pastoral scene with a stretch of water. The greatest dislike in each case has been modern abstract paintings with a preponderance of red.

'What this shows is that there is no such thing as a national culture,' says Melamid. 'There's no big difference between Kenya and Iceland, China and France.' A small wiry man, buzzing with energy, whose latest enthusiasm is for painting elephants, he has been collaborating with the larger more sedate Komar for 33 years, since they met as art students sketching dead bodies in a Moscow morgue.

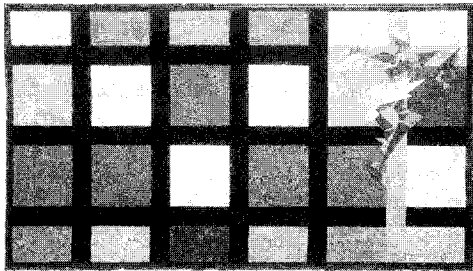


The American Least Wanted Picture by Komar and Melamid

Anyone who was shocked by the idea of selling art in the same way as tins of baked beans will almost certainly be horrified by the work of these two former dissidents. In the attempt to compute scientifically what people want to see in a painting, they contract professional pollsters to carry out nationwide surveys for about £12,000 a time. They then use the responses to more than 100 questions to paint pictures in which every detail is determined by 'viewer demand' and place them on exhibition in that country. The resulting paintings rank high, frankly, on the kitsch scale.

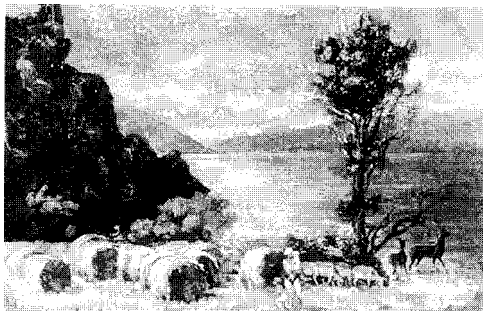
The first survey was carried out in America, their home since 1978. 'It was a complete shock,' Melamid says. 'We had expected that there would be many different choices broken down into different classes, ethnic groups and ages. Instead, whites, blacks, Hispanics, Jews, rich and poor, all wanted the same thing. We were in panic, because we had organised a huge space for the exhibition and ended up with only two paintings - the favourite and least favourite.'

It was no easy task. 'Painting that first Most Wanted picture was the hardest thing I've ever done,' says Melamid. 'It was real torture.' They painted more than 100 versions before completing one they felt was right.



The French Least Wanted Picture by Komar and Melamid

They were even more amazed when surveys carried out in very different countries revealed the same choices. 'We had thought America was an anomaly,' says Melamid, 'but we got the same results again and again'. Without exception, people want blue landscapes with water and mountains. The Danes wanted a ballet dance by the lake and a national flag; the Portuguese wanted their lake to have a small village on a far bank, and the Kenyans wanted a hippo as well as the two deer grazing by the lake favoured by other nations, but such differences were slight.



The French Most Wanted Picture by Komar and Melamid

The latest results, for Germany and Holland, are no exception. 'It shows that countries shouldn't try to define themselves by culture, as culturally we're much more similar than we want to admit,' says Melamid. 'People won't want to hear this, but perhaps McDonalds has the right idea.'

Once they have raised the money to do the poll, the next country on their list is Britain. 'The British like to think they're different,' Melamid grins, 'but it will be interesting to see what we turn up.'

Having now painted 15 Most Wanted and Most Unwanted paintings, Melamid and Komar turn them out quickly, in a few days, rather than the weeks needed the first time around. Once every country has been done, they plan a huge touring exhibition as well as a book, from which, they say, 'people can draw their own conclusions'.

Some of the many messages they have received over the Internet are less than polite about the exercise, but Melamid shrugs off criticism. 'If they want to think this is just a global intellectual joke, that's up to them.'

Some critics argue that many different paintings could have resulted from the poll data. But surprisingly, when an American television show invited different artists to do a painting from survey results, they came up with similar pictures.

Melamid claims the exercise was inspired by the western world's reliance on polls: 'If majority will is seen as good enough for determining a country's political set-up, a then why not for art?' But he admits: 'I'm not sure if it's great art or if it's the right path to art- we're just mediums.'

Not surprisingly, many in the art world are less enthusiastic about the idea. Melamid and Komar do not care: 'We're used to being unpopular.' Outraged by the political nature of their work, the Soviet authorities once bulldozed one of their exhibitions, and they won few friends with their 1978 exhibition of World Leaders with Right Ear Cut Off, which showed Brezhnev, Mao, Begin and Sadat with their right ears covered in bandages.

When an exhibition was held last month in Lisbon to show Portugal's Favourite and Least Favourite Painting, the response was positive. 'I can really imagine having this up at home,' said Maria Gornes, a teacher, looking at the tranquil blue scene with evening light rippling over the lake. 'Picasso and all that is all very well in a gallery, but I'm not sure I'd like to live with them. This I could look at every day without being disturbed.'

This is exactly the kind of reaction Melamid believes to be common from the Clinton-style town-hall meetings they have begun holding across America. 'The results of our polls show what we suspected - that artists paint for themselves rather than what people really want. We don't care what the art community thinks - art belongs to the people. They're our audience, after all. What we're seeing is that people really want art, but we, the elite artists, don't serve them.' That said, he admits he would not like one of the World's Favourite Paintings on his own wall.

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